

THE FILM FOUNDATION

Filmmakers for Film Preservation

Motion pictures are one hundred years old. Born out of the industrial revolution, cinema grew into the quintessential 20th century American art, endowed with the power to entertain and influence entire generations. For the first time people could share a collective memory, made of newsreels as well as fiction films.

Unfortunately, almost half of the films made in America before 1950 no longer exist in any form, having fallen victim to decay or neglect. Approximately 100 million feet of nitrate film has yet to be transferred to safety - at an average cost of two dollars per foot. Many color films are in desperate need of preservation as well.

Five hundred or even a thousand years from now, every aspect of the first century of film will be viewed and reviewed, studied and restudied. When future generations ask in disbelief, why "they" allowed so much to disappear, the "they" will be us. Rescuing the first century of film is our unique cultural responsibility.

This responsibility is felt all the more strongly when you are yourself a film maker. You are acutely aware of the enormous creative debt you owe to past masters of the craft. More selfishly, if you are a director you are also aware of the vulnerability of your own work.

Thus, it was natural that on May 1 1990, a group of film directors - Woody Allen, Francis Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Sydney Pollack, Robert Redford, Steven Spielberg and myself - announced in a press conference the creation of The Film Foundation, with the purpose of calling attention to the problems of film preservation and, more specifically, of functioning

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCAST TV
AND RECORDED SOUND

as a bridge between the Studios and the five major American Archives: The Library of Congress, The Museum of Modern Art in NY, the UCLA Film & TV Archive, George Eastman House and The American Film Institute.

Rather than being one more organization entering the field of preservation, our intent has been clear from the very outset: to intervene on behalf of the Archives where it mattered - with the Studios.

On this front, much progress has been made. Columbia Pictures and Universal are systematically proceeding in checking printing elements in their library and preserving/restoring them. Warner has been doing the same. Although they're not enthusiastic about working with the Archives, at least they keep us posted. Paramount represents a very interesting case. On their own, they've built new state-of-the-arts facilities on the Paramount lot, storing all the original negatives and keeping back-up printing elements on the East Coast. I was recently invited on a tour of their facilities and I was quite impressed.

The other Studios, we're working on it.

The other two outstanding goals set by The Film Foundation concern direct contributions to help the Archives complete ongoing restoration projects and set up a number of Subcommittees to establish reliable guidelines and practices to

ensure that current productions do not face the same tragic fate as those of the past.

The film Foundation has helped in the restoration of a number of pictures not owned by major Studios, such as John Ford's RIO GRANDE, Max Ophuls' CAUGHT, Raoul Walsh's PURSUED, Albert Lewin's THE PRIVATE AFFAIRS OF BEL AMI, and Joseph von Sternberg's THE SHANGHAI GESTURE. Together with the AFI, The Foundation participated in the re-release of SPARTACUS, and we are now planning to help complete work on a number of Republic pictures.

There are two areas that we consider particularly urgent:

1. Transfer of nitrate to safety.
2. Preservation/Restoration of those films annually chosen by the Film Preservation Board - particularly those "orphan films" (that is, not owned by Studios) such as DETOUR, or avant-garde and documentary films.

The best case scenario would be if the federal government could be involved. Of course, film transfer is a very expensive proposition. 100 million feet of nitrate equals, these days, about 200 million dollars. It is a substantial amount, but at this rate, we risk losing most of this material. Some continuous financial commitment on a federal level would be a major help.

Regarding those films chosen as "national treasures," there should be a systematic policy to guarantee their preservation/restoration - otherwise we risk preserving them only on paper.

On the weekend of March 12 1993, The Film Foundation and American Movie Classics will air a Telethon to raise funds on behalf of film preservation. We have been gathering "testimonials" from the artistic community and we hope to raise as well the public awareness. If successful, we plan to air this Telethon on an yearly basis.

Much work remains to be done to save an invaluable part of our cultural history for future generations. As we enter a new century of filmmaking, it is vital to promote public awareness in the area of preservation. Cinema has always been a popular art form so it is natural that we should all view ourselves as its custodians.

As a film student in New York in the early 60's, I was particularly fortunate to be exposed to foreign and American classics as well as "B" movies. I saw film as a learning process, a crosscultural language that brought people together to share a common experience. I'm still a film student. If I'm not making films, I'm watching them repeatedly, painfully aware of how much is there to learn. It would be a shame if future generations did not have the same chance.

Martin Scorsese